

# Improving Writing: Online Bulletin Boards

I'll let you in on a little secret. I've never gotten peer conferencing to work. I've tried response sheets with prompts, modeling, fishbowl demonstrations. But when I'd listen in, I'd still hear, "Good-job-it-was-really-good-I-liked-your-ending [or whatever feature they were supposed to focus on]." Then one day, class discussion wandered into how much time many students spend Instant Messaging each other. This discussion clicked with an experience I had had with an online book discussion bulletin board . . . so now I'll let you in on another little secret: peer conferencing using an online bulletin board.

Unless you're fortunate enough to have a school-sponsored Moodle with a behind-the-firewall bulletin board feature, you will need to find a discussion board service. The best service I have found is [www.nicenet.org](http://www.nicenet.org). It's free with no advertising, open only to participants to whom you've given the access code, easy to use, and any content can be edited or deleted by the teacher.

During a writing workshop focusing on poetry and memoir, my students posted as much of their writing as they wished on the class bulletin board. The mechanics of the bulletin board allow classmates to post responses in a threaded fashion so that all of the individual comments follow the piece to which they are responding. It is further evidence of students' natural comfort in digital

environments that I don't have to instruct them how to do this.

Using the bulletin board has increased the efficiency and quality of peer review. During traditional whole-class peer review, hard copies are passed around the room, but the variations in paper length, reader speed, and number of students with no draft to share mean that some students sit idly waiting, while others write rushed, superficial comments to keep up. In small-group peer review, where the quality of feedback depends on adeptness of the partner, not all students receive helpful comments.

On the other hand, using the bulletin board for peer review means that all students can read all other students' writing at their own pace. They can also read the kinds of comments peers (and the teacher) are making and use them as models for their own responses, as in these examples:

**FROM: Sandy Hayes**

Jenny — ahhhhhhhhhhh! I love how your way of looking at a seed comes around full circle

**FROM: Hilary**

Jenny — that was a great poem! I liked how the poem kind of made a circle like how the end is like a new beginning. Great Job!

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**FROM: Sandy Hayes**

Hilary — Your memoir gave me goosebumps. Very insightful. Your grandmother sounded like an amazing woman, one who didn't let one mistake determine the path her life would take . . .  
*my response inspired . . .*

## SIDE TRIP: SIX TIPS FOR SETTING UP A CLASSROOM ONLINE BULLETIN BOARD

1. Bulletin board versus chatroom? Chatrooms are fast-paced and ephemeral. The threads of the discussion are all tangled together, which is not as much a problem for the IM-savvy students to follow as it is for us. Bulletin boards save all the discussion so it can be continued days or even months later.
2. Choose a bulletin board where you control the access and where you can disable any student who is disrupting the community. Discourage email or private messages. All response should be open to everyone to stimulate further responses and to model effective versus ineffective comments. While it is important for students to learn to monitor their own behavior, with our awareness of the prevalence of online mean teen behavior and even bullying, teachers need to be able to oversee impulsive adolescents and to model community standards.
3. Participate in responding. Teachers' comments also model "peer review talk" for students. Just as on hard copy, we need to share suggestions for improving the writing as well as comments that build our relationship with each student.
4. Allow class time for both posting writing and responding to other students' writing. Not only does it allow all students to participate in an online community, giving class time adds to the seriousness of student attitudes toward their responses. Even though it seems ironic for students to write a message to the person sitting next to them, students are engaged and on-task. You can also set up your bulletin boards so students in different class sections can respond to each other, further widening the circle of publication and feedback.
5. Accept the purpose and voice difference between posted writing and response. Expect almost final draft mechanical correctness of posted drafts and enjoy the kidspeak, that is, appropriate use of IM and text messaging conventions. It's a good opportunity to talk about code-switching.
6. Use the bulletin board to collect final drafts for publishing either online or in print. Create a thread for best writing, and have students select their best piece and post it to that thread. It's easy to check if you've received a piece from each student. Then all you need to do is copy and paste each piece into a Web page or word processing document to create a class anthology.

**FROM:** Hilary

Jessica — that was a great poem!!!!!!!  
GREAT!!!!!!! The end line was very  
powerful. It gave me goosebumps.

*Hilary's response inspired . . .*

**FROM:** Jeremy

Jessica — . . . This poem sends shivers down  
my spine when I read it . . .

Sometimes students have an unrealistic idea of the effectiveness or sophistication of their own writing. Posting on bulletin boards allows students to read their own writing against the background of a large quantity of their peers' writing. In addition,

techniques and ideas used by peers can inspire students to apply a new skill or approach to their own writing problems.

**FROM:** Trevor

Jenny — You have alot of writing. How did you do it all?

*[to Hilary, who, in her second poem, tried a circular pattern similar to Jenny's first poem]*

**FROM:** Blake

Sweet poem! I liked how you ended it with the same thing you started it with . . .

While students still cheer each other on with "Good job. I liked it," their responses are focused

more specifically and are more likely to make helpful suggestions that go beyond surface corrections.

**FROM: Jenni**

Hilary — Oh my goodness! This poem was AWESOME! I honestly could see the girl in this poem as I read it. The only suggestion I have is to put “sadly I’m a human running from my own kind” on its own line underneath “running like a mouse from a cat.” Good job! -Jenni

**FROM: Mandi**

Hilary — That’s very deep. It is so true, it is sad that all those people were running from their own kind. they weren’t running from scary beasts, they were running from humans. that really is a great poem Hilary. Unfortunately it is true and you can really see that in your last line. You did really well! Yeah! ~Mandi

While I’ve found that almost all of the comments students write follow expectations of appropriate peer review, they playfully slip in their out-of-school writing with IM and text-messaging voices, giving classmates on the other side of the digital divide an opportunity to participate in the digital culture.

**FROM: Ari**

i really liked ur poem. it was kool how it went from when she was in the train to when she was there at the camp.

**FROM: Amanda**

. . . you some how just made it work . . . it was awesome (not good like i said before because i said i wasn’t going to say the same thing ha ha lol)

And Mark, a reserved student, posted this comment to his *own* writing:

**FROM: Mark**

Hey mark I liked your memoir. it reminded me a lot of my own writing style. but you had no errors and the story was completely engrossing. you really ARE the man! we should be friends, bro.

Students gain confidence from the support publicly modeled by the teacher and expanded by their classmates. Is this possible without using a bulletin board? Sure. But with our class sizes of 30 and more, it’s one more tool we can use to reach each student one by one. I’ve deliberately chosen many examples related to Hilary’s writing for just this reason. Through the year, Hilary was a cheerful but indifferent student. Through the bulletin board responses, she emerged as a leader. Her last posting to the bulletin board was this letter to me:

*Dear Mrs. Hayes, I want to thank you for all that you have done for me and the class this year. I have to admit I started the year off badly. I wasn’t trying hard enough. I wasn’t working to my full potential. By the end of the year though I have made a great improvement. I might not be getting an A but I’m doing better than I was and that’s always good.*

Ahhhh! Hilary, your response gives me goosebumps!